

INDIVIDUAL CONFESSION & ABSOLUTION

A Brief History, part 2

Because this is an historical overview of sin and forgiveness in the church, the summaries are reflective of what was taught by some people in certain period. They do not necessarily of the Lutheran doctrine of confession and absolution.

Why Church History?

History is the field in which the biblical teaching of repentance and forgiveness was practiced and applied in the Church. It's the record of how Scripture has been brought into the daily lives of individual people and into particular times and particular places. Throughout the centuries many Christians have been wrestling with and seeking to answer the same questions that we have.

Council of Trent (Roman Catholic; 1545–1563)

In response to the Reformation, the Council issued 15 canons on the Sacrament of Penance. The highlights:

- The acts of the penitent, namely, contrition, confession, and satisfaction, constitute the sacrament.
- Contrition (sorrow with the purpose of not sinning in the future) and attrition (fear of punishment) are distinguished. Contrition is needed for a proper confession.
- The distinction between mortal and venial sins is maintained. All mortal sins, even those which are secret, must be confessed. Confession can be beneficial for venial sins [those “not leading to spiritual death” (dictionary definition)].
- Absolution is a judicial act, not a mere ministry of pronouncing and declaring that sins are remitted. The priest is a judge, not primarily the one who proclaims God's Word.
- Though guilt is remitted in the absolution, temporal punishment is not always fully remitted. Satisfaction makes up for these temporal punishments. It also educates and heals.

The Eve of the Reformation

Three types of confession were in practice:

1. Private, or individual, confession (sacramental), followed by the absolution (“I absolve you from your sins”).
2. General confession (*Offene Schuld*), usually following the sermon. The absolution is stated in the form of a wish or desire or as a declaration.
3. The *confiteor*, a penitential prayer said at the beginning of the Mass with an absolution in the form of a wish or desire.

Luther and the Lutheran Confessions

It has been said that the greatest contribution of Luther to the church was his correct teaching and proper use of the sacrament of penance. His attention was focused on the practice of individual confession and absolution. “Cognizant of its importance in the life of the Christian, he set out to free the prevalent practice from misuse and false implications and to base it again on sound, biblical foundations” (Precht, 334).

Highlights from Luther:

- His theology of sin. Sin isn't merely a matter of acts but also of man's being as a fallen creature. He doubts that it is possible to distinguish between mortal and venial sins. In the Smalcald Articles (1537), he says, "There is nothing in us that is not sinful."
- The focus on the conscience. A person is not required to confess all sins but only those that oppress the conscience.
- The centrality of faith. There is no need to probe into the degree of contrition (sorrow) or the strength or will to lead a better life on the part of the one who confesses (i.e., "Are you really sorry?").
- Confession has two parts (not three): contrition ("terror smiting the conscience through the knowledge of sin") and faith ("born of the Gospel of absolution") that for Christ's sake sins are forgiven. These are worked by God alone through Law and Gospel.
- The absolution is unconditional. It does not depend on the degree of contrition, for that destroys faith. Burdened and anxious consciences receive the comfort of the forgiveness of sins that is personally and individually imparted. This is neither simply a proclamation ("there is forgiveness" or wish for forgiveness ("may your sins be forgiven"). "It is the actual impartation and appropriation by faith of the forgiveness of sins in Christ. And the absolution of the pastor on earth is one with God's absolution in heaven" (Precht, 338). The absolution is effective, that is, it effects and works forgiveness. Luther wrote, "It is Christ who sits there, Christ who hears, Christ who answers and not a man."
- It is this gift that properly leads Christians to make use of individual confession and absolution. The Lutheran Confessions speak of this individual confession.

Small Catechism

1528 AD

What is confession?

Confession has two parts. First, that we confess our sins, and second, that we receive absolution, that is, forgiveness, from the pastor as from God Himself, not doubting but firmly believing that by it our sins are forgiven before God in heaven.

What sins should we confess?

Before God we should plead guilty of all sins, even those we are not aware of, as we do in the Lord's Prayer; but before the pastor we should confess only those sins which we know and feel in our hearts.

Which are these?

Consider your place in life according to the Ten Commandments: Are you a father, mother, son, daughter, husband, wife, or worker? Have you been disobedient, unfaithful, or lazy? Have you been hot-tempered, rude, or quarrelsome? Have you hurt someone by your words and deeds? Have you stolen, been negligent, wasted anything, or done any harm?